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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0617
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 1943
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 8979
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7217
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5156
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3358
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 5112
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 1389
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0647
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4222
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 9540
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 6840
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 1318
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3768
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000945

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

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SUBJECT: RULING PARTY FEELING VULNERABLE AFTER SOUTHERN
ELECTIONS, ELECTION STRATEGY UNCERTAIN

REF: COLOMBO 942

Classified By: AMBASSADOR PATRICIA A. BUTENIS. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) SUMMARY. The United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), which includes President Mahinda Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), won the southern provincial election with a 67 percent majority, considerably lower than their goal of 75 to 80 percent. This setback may shift their strategy for presidential and parliamentary elections. An announcement on elections by the president is expected sometime this week, perhaps at the SLFP's conference on October 17. Nonetheless, the party and most press outlets continue to hail the election as a major victory. END SUMMARY.

Smaller Margin Could Alter Election Strategy

12. (SBU) On October 10, just over a million voters went to the polls across the southern districts of Galle, Matara, and Hambantota in the provincial elections. With a voter participation rate of about two-thirds, the UPFA won a 67 percent majority, garnering 36 seats, plus the two bonus seats assigned to the overall winner, for a total of 38 seats. The UNP won 25 percent of the vote, collecting 14 seats. The nationalist JVP party won 6 percent of the vote, earning 3 seats.

13. (C) President Rajapaksa is expected to speak at the SLFP congress on October 17 and could use the opportunity to announce the presidential election schedule, which is currently uncertain. (NOTE: Until a few days ago, it was widely assumed the president would call for presidential elections in January to take advantage of his popularity following the defeat of the LTTE. END NOTE.) Despite crowing over the governing party's win, Rajapaksa most likely realizes that the 67 percent victory does not assure a decisive win in the upcoming national elections. He may also be concerned that outside of the southern, majority Sinhalese-Buddhist province, his UPFA coalition could not achieve the necessary parliamentary majority to amend the

constitution to change the current system of proportional representation, which would benefit the ruling party and decrease the influence of the minority parties.

14. (C) After the ruling coalition's smaller-than-expected win, some observers have speculated that the government may hold off on national elections until after parliamentary elections in April 2010. The government began backpedaling on its previous preference to hold early elections towards the end of the campaign, illustrating their lack of confidence in gaining an 80 percent victory. The government could wait as long as four months to announce the parliamentary elections and, with almost two years left in his presidential term, Rajapaksa could postpone calling elections until approximately six weeks before the actual elections.

Splitting the Sinhalese-Buddhist Vote

15. (C) The ruling party probably fears the opposition United National Party's (UNP) likely increased participation in a national election, and the nascent United National Alliance (UNA) electoral alliance with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and others, which could split the Sinhalese-Buddhist vote. General Sarath Fonseka and Sarath Silva's participation in either a second or third party alliance would likely take votes away from the UPFA in a national election. Fonseka's weekend speech where he said "this may be the last time (he) addresses the army," did nothing to allay the ruling party's fears.

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16. (C) The nationalist and often anti-Western JVP won 3 seats and 6 percent of the vote, up significantly from 2.5 percent in the last provincial election in Uva province. This is notable because the votes that the governing party lost went to the more radical JVP, as opposed to the more liberal UNP. In the recent past, the JVP has won 5 percent or less of the vote, though historically, the party's increased popularity corresponded with high levels of unemployment.

COMMENT

17. (C) This weekend's election results exposed fissures and weaknesses within the ruling UPFA, and the government appears uncertain how to proceed. The opposition is probably comfortable with this uncertainty and, indeed, is most likely waiting to react to the government's next move.

18. (C) Reports of intimidation, destruction of property, and even physical violence leading up to the southern provincial election are probably a prelude to upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections (reftel). Despite these shenanigans, and the UPFA's heavy investment in the southern polls, the ruling party was still unable to attract more than 67 percent in the heart of their constituency. The government will not be able to control the national electorate as ably as they did in the southern province, and their concerns about a decisive national victory may be well-founded.

BUTENIS